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ABSTRACT

Proposals for the adoption of programs to improve the quality of education frequently emphasize the importance of concentrating on the individual school building as the center of the change process. This emphasis has led to increasing support for moving the locus of decision making downward to bring about what is called "school based instructional management." This idea is analyzed in the broader context of the decentralization of education decision making. The policy options available are derived from an array of policy issues. This booklet discusses these issues under three group headings: (1) clarifying the concept; (2) responding to conditions and restraints; and (3) relating to the total school program. (SI)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

EDUCATION POLICY

Decentralizing Education Decision Making: A Policy Framework

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers of the Northwest and Pacific

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Senior Policy Analyst
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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DECENTRALIZING EDUCATION DECISION MAKING:

A POLICY FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Proposals for the adoption of systematic programs to improve the quality of education frequently emphasize the importance of concentrating on the individual school building as the center of the change process. This emphasis has led to increasing support for moving the locus of decision making downward to bring about what is often popularly called "school-based (or building-based or site-based) instructional management." Rather than being limited to any of these terms, it is possibly more useful to analyze the issues in the broader context of the decentralization of education decision making.

The idea, attractive and valuable as it initially appears to be, does not yet seem to be firmly rooted in a policy framework which would give it greater clarity, usefulness, and direction. Appropriate policy choices need to be made.

The policy options available are derived from the array of policy issues that can be identified. These issues may reasonably be grouped under three headings:

I. Clarifying the concept

II. Responding to the conditions and restraints

III. Relating to the total school program

I. Clarifying the Concept

"Decentralized education decision making" has little precise meaning or ascertainable value in itself. It takes on both meaning and worth when understood in a fairly limited context of specific definition and application. What it means and how effectively it can be used depends on this context.

Conflicting pressures. One marked characteristic of the contemporary educational and social scene is the persistence of conflicting pressures, some moving toward decentralization, others toward centralization. For example, there is an abundance of rhetoric about "empowering" teachers to make it possible for them to become more professional, more autonomous, and hence better qualified to make professional decisions on their own. Likewise, individual schools are urged to break out of the pack, to think boldly, to innovate. At the same time, however, both teachers and schools often find their efforts circumscribed by increasingly stringent monitoring, continued categorical funding (accompanied by detailed reporting requirements) in support of "accountability," in addition to being increasingly subjected to centralized curriculum standards and testing programs at both state and national levels. Students, moreover, feel the effects of the same competing pressures—urged on the one hand to become more self-directive, but held to an increasingly prescriptive curriculum. Even the pursuit of educational equity, a splendidly liberating concept in itself, gets bogged down in authoritarian directives and centralized decision making.

Scope and Timing. The effective meaning of decentralized decision making is often a function of its scope and timing. If it is presented as a practice which is to be introduced in at-first limited fashion— segmented and incremental, applied to specific pieces of the school program, one step at a time—it will present quite different policy issues than if it is a sudden, comprehensive change of policy.

Degree of pressure. Decentralization of decision making, as a policy in itself, can be managed in ways that put varying amounts of pressure on the participants. It can be offered as a purely experimental approach: just this once, just in this case, let's give it a try. It could be considered as an ordinary, accepted, proven practice, but still to be employed only on a purely voluntary basis. Or it could be imposed as an executive decision, an administrative mandate: you *shall* decide this at the building level.

Sharply targeted inclusions and exclusions. In some cases, decentralized decision making may be very specifically targeted: building-level staffing *assignments* may be fair game, but not staffing *patterns*, class size, or other personnel policies. Professional development programs may be subject to building-level decision making, but the relation of these to salary schedules considered a central-office function. It is rarely an all-or-nothing matter.

Confusing terminologies. Clouding the policy issues associated with decentralized decision making are some terminologies which may not have clearly agreed-upon meanings, especially those directly associated with the popular concept of decentralization called specifically "building-based management."

The building may not actually be the focus of interest; it is more likely the individual classroom. The "building" is simply a means of focusing attention on a program serving a common group of individual teachers under the instructional leadership of a principal. The program is building-based but classroom-oriented.

Furthermore, the emphasis is clearly on *instructional* concerns, not the total school program. There are many system-wide concerns—district goals, curriculum standards, data requirements, assessment programs, budgetary allocations, personnel policies, to name only a few—in which the central office must play a major role. At the building level, too, there are program elements which certainly affect instruction but which are not themselves primarily instructional; these are most appropriately and expeditiously handled through the office of the principal as administrative matters. In brief, "instructional management" is not everything that happens in a building; it embraces only those elements of the program which most clearly affect the teaching-learning process.

Even if the scope of the concept is thus limited, the terminology used is still a potential stumbling block: Is "management" too narrow a concept in itself? Because that term to some connotes a manager-centered, even autocratic style, one which is concerned with procedural nuts-and-bolts matters, with demanding and demonstrating "results," the term seems more appropriate to commerce and industry than to education. Perhaps to question the term "management" represents a limited, prejudiced viewpoint, but it is also possible that the *leadership* qualities and activities attributed to the best principals and teachers do need more emphasis. The terminology does not necessarily have to be changed, but its intended *meaning* may have to be clarified.

Unspoken assumptions. Certain assumptions are almost articles of faith for those who believe strongly that education decision making should be more open and democratic. One of these assumptions is that decisions are best when they are made as close as possible to the level at which they are to be carried out. Another is that decisions made by a group are inherently better than those made by an individual.

These beliefs about the nature of decision making are so deeply ingrained that they are often not directly articulated; they remain unspoken; they are just there. To question them seems impolite, if not almost indecent. Actually, the purpose here is not to challenge or to contradict these assumptions, but to point out that there are opposing viewpoints which may have some merit.

It could be reasonably argued that some decisions are best made by those somewhat removed from the point of action or execution. There is such a thing as occupational myopia. A dedicated, intelligent, perceptive classroom professional may be so immersed in the problems of the individual classroom that inappropriate instructional decisions, not consistent with the goals of the school or its curricular and instructional purposes, are made just because they seem "right." Distance may enhance perspective.

Similarly, decisions made through consensus may tend to counteract the effects of individual prejudice or narrowness of vision, but they may also inadvertently stifle individualism through the powerful forces of group persuasiveness. What results is "group-think," rather than the distillation of the most perceptive individual thinking of the members of the group.

II. Responding to Conditions and Constraints

State/local differences. The fundamental policy decision to endorse and support decentralized decision making is one appropriate to either the state or the local district level, but it seems unlikely that there will be significant change in educational practice unless both levels are involved. The conditions and constraints which will have to be considered are different at the two levels, but very closely related.

The state education agency officials will doubtless need to consider and adopt policies which are generally facilitative in nature. The state will probably perceive its functions to be those of support and assistance, smoothing the way and removing the barriers so the decentralized decision making can become a reality. The local education authorities will no doubt perceive their function to be more directly operational. However, both will be concerned with related aspects of the same issues, ranging from the broad to the very specific.

Goals. Unless the state has articulated clear educational goals which the local district has incorporated into its own goals, and the personnel at the building level have in turn understood and accepted these goals, there is little point in trying to modify the decision- making aspect of instructional management. If the building-level personnel are not sure what they are trying to do, there is no way that they can effectively manage it.

Control. The degree of decentralization of education decision making at either state or local level is a very fundamental decision to be made by the policy body or bodies concerned. It is fairly axiomatic that a state which chooses to exert a high degree of statutory or regulatory control of the local districts (all for their own good, of course, and with proper obeisance to the doctrine of local control!) does not provide an environment offering much opportunity for significant local decision making. By the same token, a local district administration which is functionally centralized in its control cannot give more than lip-service to decentralized decision making. The same is true, of course, in the building-classroom relationship.

All of this is not to specify what the local, state or building policy regarding decentralization *should* be. It is merely another illustration of the hard fact that any effective policy must be consistent with the overall conditions and constraints which exist.

Legal strictures. No matter what the policy *intent* may be in encouraging more centralized education decision making, the reality is that laws often make the decisions. This should be obvious, and it is—rationally. Psychologically, though, it is frustrating for building-level instructional personnel to come up with splendid and innovative ideas, only to be reminded that they *have* to do this and they *can't* do that. The understandable reaction of those with the great plans is that "the administration" or "they" didn't really want our ideas in the first place.

The policy issue here is one of devising ways to make entirely clear what instructional direction is desired, but at the same time to make the built-in limitations equally clear, so that the enthusiastic planners will not feel betrayed.

Negotiated agreements. Some of the potentially most troublesome of the conditions and constraints within which any educational policy making must operate are those which stem from the provisions of formally negotiated labor agreements. These agreements typically spell out, sometimes in agonizing detail, just what can and cannot be done in any matter related to salaries or condition of employment.

While this situation can have a very limiting effect—for there is virtually no instructional improvement which does not have some impact on the conditions set forth in the negotiated agreements—there are grounds for reasonable optimism that instruction improvements are not thereby stymied. First, a good deal of the early flamboyant and abrasive posturing which marked the development of the negotiations movement has simmered down with the growing realization that a more civil, even perhaps statesmanlike, approach would be mutually beneficial. In addition, even the tentative approaches to providing for more teacher participation in instructional-management decisions are demonstrating that reasonableness is effective and rewarding.

Data needs. In moving toward decentralized decision making, policy-making bodies are likely to discover that one of the constraining conditions is a lack of adequate profile-type data at the building and classroom level. Providing the encouragement and the opportunity to make instructional decisions is an empty gesture unless the detailed knowledge in which they can be rationally based is available.

Data that do not necessarily have to be aggregated at the state (or even at the district) level are nevertheless of utmost importance at the building level. A clear understanding of home backgrounds, individual learning profiles, comparative assessment and evaluation data—these are some of the bases for intelligent decision making. Without these data, perhaps the instructional decisions might just as well be handed down from above.

Professional skill level. Effective use of decentralized decision making is often handicapped by the lack of specific technical skills on the part of those who are supposed to be taking part. Competent instructional personnel do not necessarily know planning processes, intervention techniques, change strategies, curriculum alignment methodologies, or the most effective use of electronic instructional technologies.

Until provision is made for enhancing the professional skill levels of those who are to be involved in the classroom level work, policies which simply endorse and applaud decentralized decision making will properly be seen as mere window dressing.

Policy Options

If direct attention is given to the conditions and constraints outlined above, option possibilities may begin to emerge. Several examples suggest themselves.

If the educational goals are not clear or if the educational changes desired have not been well articulated, an initial policy option would be to make this the first order of business. The level in the educational organization, state and local both, to which particular responsibilities have been allocated likewise could be spelled out.

In specific response to constraints, a policy option could be to work to change any inhibiting laws, regulations, negotiated agreements, fiscal rigidities, or any of the other limiting factors which make it difficult or impossible for appropriately decentralized decision making to succeed.

Giving direct support and assistance to the movement toward decentralization is another possibility: fiscal and logistical support for more adequate data bases, money for released time for planning, budgetary support for in-service training and staff development—all of these are possible policy options.

The probable consequences of any of these are very difficult to determine in advance, but there would seem to be every reason to anticipate favorable results from exercising any of these options.

III. Relating to the Total School Program

A policy decision to embark on a campaign to decentralize decision making would also involve determining the direction that this movement would take in relation to the total education program.

Independent entity. It is quite possible that the decentralized decision-making approach could be endorsed and supported simply as an independent, free-standing idea in its own right, one not expected to translate into specific program improvement. This is not at all far-fetched; there could well be important strategic arguments for coming out strongly in support of the idea simply for its beneficial side effects. Psychologically, it strengthens the idea that we're all in this together for the good of the kids! Politically, it becomes a form of "empowerment" of the teachers, a rather imprecise but extremely popular concept.

Required/voluntary. How the decentralized decision-making concept would relate to the rest of the school program would depend not only on the intent expressed in the policy statement, but on the specific decision about whether it would be a binding or an optional policy. Sound arguments could be advanced either way, but the choice made would strongly influence how the program might move and the effects it might have.

An integral element of the total program. If the policy decision is to consider decentralized decision making as a key element in specific plans to improve the quality of the schools, whether the overall plan is called a "School Improvement Program" or "restructuring education," or by whatever term is descriptive or popular or both, then it becomes necessary to relate it directly to every overall policy to ensure effective coordination of efforts.

Options

The direction taken by the decision-making authorities in relating decentralized decision making to the total school program entails choices with fairly clear-cut potential outcomes.

If the movement is seen not as a means to specific school improvement, but rather as a strategic device that is psychologically sound and politically potent, the program can have an immediate, even a rousing start. The long, detailed planning and effort to make it work toward specific ends would not be necessary if the ends did not need to be identified. Immediacy, rather than ultimate effectiveness, would be the chief benefit.

In choosing between the required and the voluntary approaches, the primary basis for judgment would come down essentially to an assessment of the related values of smoothness and speed. Imposition of a program usually begets more friction and resistance, but it gets the job started more quickly without waiting for complete, or nearly complete, agreement. On the other hand, if the program is purely voluntary there may be more willing acceptance of change, but since nobody is really under pressure, there may well be minimal action.

If the move toward more decentralized decision making is designed as an integral part of a total program of educational quality improvement, each stage, phase, and aspect of the total program may have to be reviewed from a policy perspective to see that all of it is going in the same direction. Each aspect of the program may need separate identification, with the assignment and acceptance of individual and group spheres of responsibility. The new instructional management concept or management style will be unlikely to work unless there is clear policy direction given to such program areas as goals and objectives, evaluation and assessment, curriculum standards, and instructional methodologies.

Decentralized decision making directed toward total program improvement is not a move toward simplification, but in its very complexity may well be found the basis for effective systemwide change.

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- Developing and disseminating effective educational products and procedures
- Conducting research on educational needs and problems
- Providing technical assistance in educational problem solving
- Evaluating effectiveness of educational programs and projects
- Providing training in educational planning, management, evaluation and instruction
- Serving as an information resource on effective educational programs and processes including networking among educational agencies, institutions and individuals in the region

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